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ABSTRACT

The contemporary interest in the pursuit of excellence in education is derived from a long tradition of efforts to provide special schooling defined as excellent. In the current movement, excellence, though ambiguously defined and political in nature, denotes a necessary separation among people and in its subtle trappings of class, contains elitist goals for society and school. The expression of these hidden goals required means and indicators that were more politically acceptable. As with excellence, gifted and talented programs and teacher certification programs operate under vague and ambiguous guidelines. Test scores, used as the objectification of quality in gifted and talented programs, provide an insulation for dominant classes who produce and utilize them, and represent a public myth of fairness and objectivity consistent with Abner Cohen's mystique of elites presented in "The Politics of Elite Culture" (1981). Another manifestation of the excellence movement was the proclamation of current teachers as "non-excellent" and the search for a new set of teacher certification standards. The politics of excellence, using vague and confusing goals and means which convey a mystique, operates to obscure the direction of action being pursued in social and educational policy. Hence, the excellence movement in education appears to persuade the overclasses of their superiority and socially sanctioned ruling position. (LH)

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THE POLITICS OF EXCELLENCE

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Introduction

It will come as no surprise to you that we are striving for excellence in the society and in our schools. Human society has been able to survive the agrarian and the industrial revolutions; we have gone beyond the paleolithic age, the stone age, and the atomic age; and we have endured Kafka, Brave New World, and 1984. Can excellence hold any fears? Isn't excellence our new national motto? Is there a university or school district which has not used the term to describe its efforts? Are these not excellent questions?

Education Week, "American Education's Newspaper of Record", headlined a recent story "Excellence: a 50-State Survey", and devoted nineteen of its forty pages to the topic, in addition to two front page stories on it.(Feb 6, 1985;pp 11-30) Excellence was a term on the front page of many preceding issues of the weekly paper since January. Educational Leadership has an entire issue on "Excellence" (March, 1985). Phi Delta Kappan featured it in its January, 1984 issue. Most widely read publications in education have used or overused the term in the past two years.

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Of 64 articles on the aims of education cited in Education Index, for the period July, 1983 through June, 1984, 12 used the word "excellence" in their titles, and there is a separate Index citation category, "Excellence in Education"; just ten years ago the Index showed not one of the 34 articles cited used the term in their titles, and there was no citation category using excellence. Limited circulation publications like the LRE Project Exchange devote much space and effort to it. (Naylor, 1985) Even Burger King, noted for its own concerns for quality, sponsors national awards for excellence in education.

Traditions of Excellence

The National Commission on Excellence in Education (A Nation at Risk,1983) presumably started the most recent popularization of the term, although the vast majority of 150 students in courses I have taught since that report appeared believe that the key phrase in that report was not excellence, but "rising tide of mediocrity". One could argue that the National Commission took its title from a burgeoning excellence industry in the corporate world, exemplified by the best-selling book, In Search of Excellence:Lessons from America's Best Run Companies. (Peters and Waterman, 1982) As is well known, there is a long and unfortunate history of educational administration following ideas from industry (Callahan,1962; Spring, 1972; Button, 1984), but we seem to insist on continuing it.

It could also be that the contemporary interest in the

pursuit of excellence in education derives from a long tradition of efforts to provide special schooling for people identified as excellent. The socially acceptable definition of schooling for the excellent varies in time periods and locations according to social and political conditions, but provides an historic line to recent times. Marrou notes, for example, that in ancient civilizations like Arabia, the "upper class is composed of an aristocracy of warriors, and education is therefore of a military kind...training character and building up physical vigour and skill rather than developing the intelligence." (Marrou, 1956, p.xiv). He also describes such education as the route to success in old oriental societies: "For the child, education was a means of entry into a privileged class." (p. xv).

Characteristics of educational excellence, he argues, changed from warrior to sport to scribe to intellectual in reflection of characteristics associated with dominant class positions: "In the second century B.C., side by side with physical education, there appeared a genuinely intellectual form of teaching which aimed at giving the ephebes at least a smattering of literature and philosophy. Its standard was not very high: the ephebia existed for the benefit of young men who had no need to work for their living..." (Marrou,p. 108).

R. H. Tawney, observing that "educational policy is always social policy", examined the public boarding-school tradition of

the wealthy in England. He argued:

> In their subservience to money and social position, and the tranquil, unsophisticated class consciousness which that subservience bred, the public boarding-schools, it might be said, did not rise above the standards of their generation, but neither did they fall below them....They (the students) are taught, not in words or of set purpose, but by the mere facts of their environment, that they are members...of a privileged group, whose function it will be, on however humble a scale, to direct and command, and to which leadership, influence, and the other prizes of life properly belong. The capacity of youth to protect itself against the imbecilities of its elders is not the least among the graces bestowed upon it...but that does not excuse us for going out of our way gratuitously to inflict our fatuities upon it. If some of the victims continue throughout life...to see the world through class spectacles, a policy which insists on their wearing them at school must bear part of the responsibility. (pp.58,60-1)

In more recent times, elements of progressive education challenged class distinctions traditionally associated with ideas of excellence as suggested above: "The philosophy of experimental education, then, demands the existence of the classless society." (Hook, 1933). Progressive education's emergence and confusion, however, fueled the post-Sputnik great debates over excellence, mediocrity, and education.(Graham, 1967; Scott, et al., 1959; Cremin, 1965). There has not been a resolution to this battle over mass and elite education, despite energetic attempts to democratize excellence. (The Pursuit of Excellence in Education, 1958;Gardner, 1961; Linton and Nelson, 1968).

The Current Excellence Movement

Educationists appear to have quickly responded to the current situation by often using the term excellence. The National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education, formed

by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, exemplifies this, as does the recent publication of the American Educational Studies Association, Pride and Promise: Schools of Excellence for all the People (Raywid, et al., 1984), and the preceding brief notation of journals and newspapers in the field. We are, it is widely reported, in the Excellence Movement.

In any movement as momentous as this is purported to be one expects a level of confusion. That certainly seems to be the case with the excellence movement in education; it could easily be called chaos and frenzy. Usually, though, one can identify goals of a movement (however fuzzy), and some means for accomplishing them. Movements often have leaders who articulate the goals, and some indicators of success or failure. And the idea of movements conveys the ideas of change and opposition, since the movement intends to go in some direction from where things have been, and there are forces desiring to keep things as they have been or to move them in another direction. Movements are, thus, political; and the excellence movement in education is no exception.

Even if the concept of movement cannot be intellectually sustained in relation to the current splatter of the word excellence across the media, there remains a politics related to the attempt to create the aura of a movement. There is a political setting in which the term excellence in education has social significance, with values, goals, and means. Values are an important early consideration because they provide an examina

tion of definitions that structure the politics.

Anti-Motherhood: Values and Definitions

What sort of thoughtful person would argue against excellence? For that matter, what sort might stand against justice, or equality, or freedom, or any of several values considered basic to a democratic system? We should not leave out, of course, apple pie or peanut butter, but there is potentially more dispute on those matters. Who would speak against justice, equality or freedom? Obviously, a deviant, a dictator, or an ignorant savage might.

Noble savants of academe, hardly deviant in the main, possibly dictatorial, and sometimes savage but not ignorant, would not want to advocate injustice, discrimination, and slavery. Yet we all know that such people have strongly advocated these positions in the past. In our enlightened age, however, respected academics and politicians would not want to be in the position of arguing against core democratic values; they do, of course, recognize that the words which stand for these values are code symbols that depend entirely on how they are used in specific situations and definitions.

Thus, one argues in support of justice, equality or freedom by specifying a particular meaning, even when that meaning could be construed to be an opposite of the value in another situation. Justice can mean cutting off the hands of robbers, killing muggers in a subway, or allowing selected criminals to live in select accommodations or go free because public embarrassment has

been their punishment. Equality can mean a free market with equal and unequal choice, a compensatory system to correct initial disadvantage, a minimum safety net for basal equality, an outcomes test, or a communal structure. These, of course, are not equal conditions, and there is an internal inconsistency among them that suggests basic conflict if not contradiction. And certainly there is a fundamental conflict possible among the broad values of justice, equality and freedom, depending upon definitions and situations in which they are applied; e.g., justice or freedom may create inequality; freedom and justice may be opposites in particular cases.

This brings us, among other things, to a consideration of the politics which operate to govern which value definition carries most weight at any given time or in any given situation. This is an issue of power, manipulation, status, image and interest group: the stuff of political study. The distribution and attainment of power, the "exercise of political power as a means of social control" (Odegard, 1956, P. 96), public opinion and communication, and interest group influence are part of the domain of political inquiry. (Handy and Harwood, 1973).

This is not to put excellence into the same category of basic democratic values as justice, equality and freedom, but to suggest that it belongs to a category of code words that have a normally positive valence in public discourse, vary by specific definition and situation, and are subject to a politics which

operates to preserve and protect elements of special interest.

Excellence and Elitism

Excellence, in addition to its qualitative difference from justice, equality, and freedom, also differs significantly because it denotes a necessary separation among people. To excel is to be superior to others, to stand above, to outdo. While one could interpret justice, equality and freedom from elite perspectives, that is not a necessary condition; excellence seems to require some form of elite. Definitional positions on justice and other democratic values may lead to differential treatments of people, but they need not start from that premise. Excellence, however, starts on the idea of separation among people(s).

This is of particular importance, since the political rhetoric surrounding basic democratic values can incorporate those now disadvantaged, but political rhetoric surrounding necessarily elite terms like excellence must boldly announce their meaning for the advantaged or tread lightly on the required hierarchical separation. In a nominally democratic society, the goal of excellence requires subtle expression to retain public support. It would be theoretically and linguistically possible to have justice, equality and freedom for all. How can there be excellence for all and still retain any sense of the term? If all were excellent, then all would also be mediocre, and neither term would have meaning. It is in the essence of the term excellence to require elites.

Goals: Manifest and Latent

A manifest goal of an excellence movement is to achieve excellence, e.g., to increase or enhance the separation among people(s) on some criteria identified as fitting a definition of excellent. That goal may be stated in terms that attempt to incorporate large proportions of a society, like, "better than we were", or "better than other contemporary societies". There is, thus, a necessary presumption of less quality in previous times or other places.

A statement of goals for excellence may also appear as an internal societal separation for social benefit, as in the expression of support for special advantage for the best and brightest to assure excellent leadership. Often manifest goals are unstated, cloudy, or implied, which disguises the potential consequences of separatist definitions, as when advocates of merit salary structures presume consensus on the unclear characteristics of merit and lodge their views in claims of institutional and individual excellence.

Latent goals of an excellence movement could include such things as social control, ideological manipulation of the political economy, the extension of cultural hegemony, a refinement in the allocation of cultural capital, preservation of the status quo, restoration of certain elites, redressing of slippage into egalitarian values, racism, sexism, ego-support for those in advantaged positions, and others. Latent goals require closer

analysis since they are usually hidden, intentionally or not, but are often more deeply-held and pervasive than those of the manifest variety. An interesting analogy may be found in the previously neutral term, "busing", which has acquired connotations expressing manifest and latent goals in a highly politicized situation. Excellence, in its subtle trappings of class, contains elitist goals for society and school.

Michael F.D. Young's satire, The Rise of the Meritocracy, covers a period in England from 1870 to 2033, when "Britain became the first in the intellectual revolution...The workshop of the world became the grammar school of the world".(p.46). Young captures the essence of a society gone excellent, noting that in 1914, "the upper classes had their fair share of geniuses and morons, so did the workers...the fundamental change of the last century (20th)...is that intelligence has been redistributed between the classes, and the nature of the classes changed." (p.4). Further, Young writes:

> In our island we never discarded the values of the aristocracy, because we never discarded the aristocracy.... Englishmen of the solid centre never believed in equality. They assumed that some men were better than others, and only waited to be told in what respect....Most Englishmen believed, however dimly, in a vision of excellence which was part and parcel of their time-honored aristocratic tradition. It was because of this that the campaign for comprehensive schools failed....by imperceptible degrees an aristocracy of birth has turned into an aristocracy of talent." (p.48).

Young's descriptions of the eugenics campaign, the "intelligence register", an increasing gulf between the classes, test mania moving ever lower to rest on testing three-year-olds for

final careers, youth dispossessing the aged, and baby-buying, are reminiscent of other brilliant English satirists like Swift, Huxley, and Orwell. The 1980s, says Young, were the breakpoint between the old and new aristocracies. By 2030, a revolution against the meritocracy began. The goals of the meritocracy Young describes include rule by the cleverest people to insure Britain's competitive position in international affairs.

Our non-satirical 1983 Commission report states a threat to U.S. national competitiveness, especially in commerce, and cites individual needs for "skill, literacy and training" to assure not only "material rewards", but the "chance to participate fully in our national life." as grounds for pursuing excellence. (A Nation at Risk, 1983). The goals, presumably, are to assure or increase our "preeminence" in international affairs, and to produce individuals who are employable, and able to function in a democratic society that is "fostering a common culture", and which "prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom." (p.7) That there is some confusion among these goals, and potential definitional conflict, is clear. Does excellence in individual freedom and participation in national life include a possible rejection of national commercial goals? Does a common culture require divesting individual freedom of a full range of participation? If preeminence, a corollary of excellence, is the competitive goal in international terms, what consistent goal exists for individuals and groups within the nation? Does common

culture simply mean reproduction of the dominant culture, without criticism?

Gilbert (1984), drawing from MacPherson's idea that western democracies operate as "pluralist, elitist, equilibrium models" (MacPherson, 1977, p.77), notes that this process emphasizes groups rather than individuals, provides inequality of access and influence, and operates on a functionalist rationale that presumes a low level of citizen participation and only permits criticism that serves to justify the system. This establishes the limits of acceptable social knowledge and, thus, the dimensions of schooling to express this social knowledge. Goals suggested above for the excellence in education movement include individualism as well as pluralism, political participation and common culture, equity and hierarchy, and nationalistic enterprise with personal freedom. These internal contradictions, following Gilbert's reasoning, confuse and confound a definition of excellence, unless latent goals are considered.

Manifest goals of the excellence movement, surprisingly, have garnered broad public support despite their confusion and ambiguity. That may be because such latent goals as reaffirming traditional class distinctions; leadership by a power elite not far from that described by C. Wright Mills (1956); redressing of shifts toward egalitarianist concerns like the redistribution of wealth; and reasserting the influence of business interests in opposition to certain social policies on the environment,

military might, socialism, and global relations, are understood by those who wield political and media power. The latent goals of industrialist or corporate attempts to influence schooling have been examined in an interesting and diverse body of literature. (Sinclair, 1922; Carnoy,1975; Bowles and Gintis,1976; Simon,1978; Harty, 1980). The current excellence movement, when some latent goals are considered, contains extensive and pervasive political and economic strength. The expression of these hidden goals, however, requires means and indicators that are more politically acceptable.

Means and Indicators

How is excellence achieved? And how will we know what it is? Following our last excellence in education campaign, after Sputnik, a number of observers were compelled to address these questions. David McClelland wrote in 1961:

> Americans have already discovered, and are pursuing with alarming vigor, a system for encouraging excellence. It may be summed up briefly in the following formula: the best boys should go to the best schools and then on to the best jobs....We have developed objective psychological tests...so that we can discover the ablest ones quickly...the talented boy in West Redwing has a better chance of knowing than he did a generation ago that Ivy League colleges exist and that in the rankings of institutions for academic merit, they stand at the top.(pp.132,3)

The system, says McClelland, is perceived as a rational ideal, suiting American beliefs in the practical, but McClelland identifies serious weaknesses because the means and indicators of excellence are too narrowly constructed: "Ability means, for the purposes of these tests, academic excellence, skill in taking

examinations, in following instructions and finding solutions to problems set by others." (p.134.) He considers this a national problem, threatening the concept of excellence. Yet he offers little beyond the need to find other indicators of other forms of talent to reward. We are left with artificial and class-biased means of measurement. Excellence has a mystical quality, demanding elites, requiring means for separation, and providing labels for the chosen.

The Mystification Process

A confusion in goals but a precision in means may sound contradictory, but fits within a pattern examined in some political literature.

Cohen (1981), analyzing political elites and their operation in Sierra Leone, describes a mystification process using a body of symbolic beliefs and "dramaturgical practices" which serve to resolve contradictions in the maintenance of an elite culture.

Cohen states a general principle:

> In stratified societies, power groups seek to validate and sustain their elite status by claiming to possess rare and exclusive qualities essential to the society at large. In some cases these claims are rejected by the rest of the society; in others they are accepted in varying degrees; and in yet others they are developed and bestowed by the society. In closed and formally institutionalized systems of stratification, these qualities are explicitly specified and organized. In more liberal, formally egalitarian systems, on the other hand, the qualities tend to be defined in vague and ambiguous terms and objectified in mysterious, non-utilitarian symbols and dramatic performances, making up what amounts to a mystique of excellence. (pp. 1,2)

American society would seem to fit within the category of

liberal and formally egalitarian, considering the only two choices given by Cohen. Are the qualities of excellence toward which we are earnestly pushing schools defined in vague and ambiguous terms and objectified in mysterious, non-utilitarian symbols and dramatic performances? Consider some evidence.

Gardner's (1961) purpose for his book, Excellence, is to "map some of this swampy territory so that future attempts to deal with the problem of excellence will not get bogged down in irrelevancies" (p.159). He points out that free men must be competent, but "excellence implies more than competence, it implies a striving for the highest standards in every phase of life." (p.160). Devotion and conviction in regard to one's occupation, high self-expectations in performance, diversity in individual aims, and dedication to socially shared values would represent indicators of excellence for Gardner. While laudatory, this would seem to fit the concepts of vague and ambiguous, and does not seem to have provided the map for future efforts that Gardner desired.

Similarly, the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education defined excellence in three levels: for individual learners "it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in the school and in the workplace."; for school or college it means setting "high expectations and goals for all learners,"; and for the society it seems to mean adopting "these

policies...to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world." (A Nation at Risk, 1983, p. 12). The Commission posits twin goals of equity and high quality schooling, and stands against "generalized accommodation to mediocrity". This seems to have had little clarifying effect; excellence remains vague and ambiguous. But the report has had dramatic political impact.

Mysterious non-utilitarian symbols and dramatic performances can be illustrated by the writing style and press coverage on this report. The title, A Nation at Risk, suggests drama. The initial material describes the risk in terms of competition: "Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world." This is strikingly similar to the satirical language used by Michael Young in The Rise of the Meritocracy. The Commission report also casts the issue in economic (commerce, industry, technology) and military ("act of war", "unilateral educational disarmament") terminology, two powerful symbols in contemporary society. Press coverage of this document overshadowed that provided to more thorough analyses of school problems. The report seemed to confirm the worst fears already stirred by the media that education had seriously declined and massive reform was needed.

Objectifying the Indicators

Current indicators of excellence can be illustrated by the summary of "reform " activities among the states as described in

"Excellence: A 50-State Survey", (Education Week, 1985). The categories used included:

career ladder/merit pay

salary increases/new minimum

require teacher competency tests

revise certification

raised education-school standards

aid prospective teachers

add instructional time

limit extracurriculars

reduce class size

raised graduation requirements

require exit tests

statewide assessment

promotion gates test

mandatory kindergarten

preschool initiatives

raised college admission standards

This list not only summarizes what each state is doing or contemplating, it provides a set of criteria as a guide for future action by states. The comparative structure of the table, showing each state's status, and the underlying concept that the full agenda represents complete positive movement toward excellence will likely act to spur some states to adoption of items on the list. The measures most frequently undertaken, at the time

of the survey, were: raised graduation requirements(43), statewide assessment(37), required teacher competency tests(29), and revised certification requirements(28). Testing and barriers to those who do not test well dominate this list.

Identifying the Gifted and Talented

Test scores also seem to predominate in determination of those selected to participate in programs for gifted and talented youth. As with excellence, gifted and talented programs operate under vague and ambiguous guidelines, where test scores are the objectification of quality. A recent study of gifted and talented programs in 461 of 559 New Jersey school districts found test scores the primary criterion for admission (over 90% used standardized tests, while only 16% used 'culture free' tests), lack of consistency in their application(over 12 different IQ tests used and a wide range of differences in cut-off scores), an inherent unfairness in program operations(statistically significant positive relationship between per capita district expenditure and proportion of students in G/T programs), social class and anti-minority biases in the constituencies served (whites are 72% of G/T sample, but only 49% of total student population studied), and an essentially undemocratic orientation among them when measured against concepts of justice as defined in John Rawls 1982 book, A Theory of Justice.(McKenzie, 1984).

Gifted and Talented programs serve less than three per cent of the school population nationwide, but only .05 % of the school

population in Maine, and almost 6 % in Nebraska.(The Conditions of Education, 1983). This would suggest that Nebraska has twelve times the proportion of gifted and talented youth in Maine. Definitions, criteria, and dollars actually account for this disparity. In my local community, the public battle over selection into the gifted and talented program, and the extraordinarily precise cut-off scores on tests, were main issues in a school board election. Scoring one point below the cut-off meant the child was doomed to be labelled non-gifted and non-talented. Public pressure produced some flexibility, but no alteration in the basic premise that test scores measure excellence.

Even if we assume that test scores have some value in assessing students for advancement through educational institutions, socio-economic status seems to mitigate that approach to excellence. The National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, involving over 19,000 students from 1,061 schools, found in follow-up studies reported in 1981 that high ability students did not go to college if they were of lower SES, had a less adequate high school background (courses in math and science), and had lower expectations for eventual educational attainment. (Highly Able Students Who did not go to College, 1981). This is confounded by the fact that SES and test scores are correlated (p.3), test scores can be influenced by tutoring and other means requiring economic support and political knowledge, school academic programs are influenced by social class

factors in the community, and aspiration levels also seem to be related to class.

Although there is a public presumption of precision and objectivity in testing as a primary indicator of excellence, there is considerable doubt about this among experts (McClelland, 1961; Mental Measurements Yearbook, 1978). Despite pronouncements warning about the insidious nature of overreliance on test data, test scores seem to make good political tools for school and social control. Testing provides an insulation for dominant classes, who produce and utilize them, and represents a public myth of fairness and objectivity consistent with Cohen's (1981) mystification process and mystique of elites.

Going further, Cohen suggests that this mystique of excellence undergirds the power base of elites and creates a cult which incorporates not only an ideology but a pattern of life with symbols, manners, rules and traits which serve to maintain dominant power groups. This life pattern and its claims to superiority operate to provide legitimacy and power to these groups until they are exposed. Exposure, however, is exceedingly difficult because the means of discourse and awareness on the part of the public are controlled and severely limited. Techniques of mystification are used to persuade the masses that the ruling elite(s) are naturally endowed and/or best suited to further the interests of the whole society.

Cohen uses the term excellence in a number of ways to indicate this concept:

> It is a fact, however, that in ongoing hierarchical systems, most elite positions are given to members of groups who claim a monopoly on qualities of excellence. Thus, in Britain and the United States, graduates of prestigious, exclusive universities are recruited to such positions quite out of proportion to their numbers...ordinary subjects genuinely believe that their rulers are "born" to rule, that they are most qualified for organizing the lives of their countrymen.
>
> The qualities under consideration here are not specific, specialized technical skills in which people can be trained....we are concerned here with vague, mysterious qualities that elude precise definition...This is the mystique sometimes referred to as "civilization", "culture", "nobility", "excellence", or "refinement". (pp.3,4)

Mystification in Teacher Certification

For an example of this process in operation, the development of an alternative teacher certification program in New Jersey in 1983-4 is instructive. A major state revision of teacher certification, completed in 1981 and covering about two years of study and public review, had produced a new set of standards that increased requirements for those going into teaching. At about that time an election for the governorship was underway, and the incumbent Commissioner (Superintendent) of Education had become a focal point of debate over education. The Republican candidate, Thomas Kean, announced his intention to replace the incumbent Commissioner if elected. Kean won in a very narrow election.

As a part of the then emerging excellence movement in education, and in light of the political value of being a leader in educational reform, Governor Kean appointed a new state

Commissioner. An influential Newark newspaper reporter published a story that Kean's new Commissioner had plagiarized his doctoral dissertation. That Commissioner resigned; and Kean quickly moved to cover an apparent political mistake by appointing a new Commissioner, Saul Cooperman. Amid rumors of new alterations in teacher certification and following a long period of silence imposed by Cooperman, a news conference was held to announce a new alternate to teacher certification as part of Governor Kean's educational reforms.

Governor Kean, Commissioner Cooperman,and Chancellor of Higher Education Hollander presented the news conference, where only newsmen could ask questions, and unveiled a program to attract "highly talented" people into teaching. The State Department of Education document setting forth this program represented those teachers now in schools as low in measured intelligence and lacking in the ability to obtain better positions. The idea was to provide excellence in the teacher corps by recruiting excellent people into teaching, giving them five days of professional training and a permanent certificate at the end of a year of paid on-the-job training.

Ironically, the program placed these "highly talented" people under the professional jurisdiction of the same teachers so disparaged in the initial document. The essential point here, however, is the proclamation, heavily supported by the same Newark newspaper reporter and a powerful publicity effort

undertaken by the State Department of Education, that this program would attract a small group of talent and be much more rigorous than standard college-based programs.

Rigor was never very clearly defined, nor was talent, but they presumably featured academic standards. News coverage has conveyed the positive image of excellent Ph.D.s who have always wanted to teach in public schools, but were denied because of silly standard state licensing requirements. Virtually no public commentary was made on the stiffer certification requirements which had just become effective in 1982 for all college-based programs. An early analysis, however, of the differences between requirements of college-based programs and the new alternative programs shows that the alternative has much less academic rigor than the standard program in terms of grade averages, major in subject to be taught, breadth of liberal education, and professional study.(Carlson, 1984).

Protests at the sham quality of the new excellence program have not been successful because of the political climate which allows the State Education Department to define the meanings and control the discourse. The state has refused to allow research on the actual qualifications of the almost 500 persons just recruited, or a legitimate comparison between certification programs. Current teachers have been defined as "non-excellent"; the state is now empowered to determine who is excellent and to self-evaluate its own program on criteria yet to be specified; and the state retains its rights to accredit college-based

programs with which it now competes.

Excellence and the Social Order

Excellence, political elites, and the means used to sustain those elites, can be viewed from at least two perspectives. On the one hand are the views of analysts who operate from an essentially functionalist orientation, incorporating the ideas of social order maintenance and consensus. This view can be summarized as supportive of elites on the grounds that the social order is naturally hierarchical, societies require leadership, leadership is a talent limited to a relative few, the best societies require the best leaders, and the interests of society as a whole are served when proper elites govern.

Obviously, the excellence movement in education, given certain conditions, would appeal strongly to those who draw from this view. Since that is the mainstream view in American society, and in the social sciences, one can surmise a high level of support from those in leadership positions in academe and in politics. Additionally, the ego-developing messages contained in the concept of excellence, for those already advantaged by social credentials, suggest that little dissent will arise from those quarters.

In opposition to this consensus view of social order is the position that the so-called social order is a creature of ruling classes to maintain social control and perpetuate their own material interests, and that conflict is basic. As Marx and

Engels state it "The ideas of the ruling classes are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas: i.e, the class which is the dominant material force in society is at the same time its dominant intellectual force." (1970,p.64) This position would hold that particular interests of a ruling elite are served while those ruled are persuaded that it is the general interest. This is the mystification noted by Cohen, and is similar to ideas about the hidden curriculum in education and false consciousness in Marxist literature.

Some twenty years ago Poggi (1965) suggested that a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. He was commenting critically on the state of political sociology, arguing that the prevailing theory is one of "maintenance of social systems and not of their action" (p. 290). The concentration is on how a system fits together, and how its subsystems function as part of the whole. This identifies one way of seeing which has obscured another. That tradition, says Poggi, "for all its accomplishments, has largely failed to give us a sociology of policy to deal systematically and analytically with the direction of action actually pursued by its own discourse." (p. 287).

The politics of excellence, using vague and confusing goals and means which convey a mystique, operate to obscure the direction of action being pursued in social and educational policy. Stanley Aronowitz, drawing on a substantial literature, notes, "For a large proportion of children of the underclasses, schools are perceived as a part of the structure of their

oppression, institutions that are oriented to persuade them to enter the `mainstream' of labor, consumption, and other aspects of the prevailing normative structures." (p.102). The excellence movement in education appears to persuade the overclasses of their superiority and a socially sanctioned ruling position.

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